

nonical in this regard is Bertolt Brecht's manifesto "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication" (1932), which denounced the conventional unidirectionality of radio transmission (from one point to many points) and advocated a multipath model of radio communication (from many points to many points), whereby listeners became broadcasters. Such ideas have been central to diverse conceptualizations of interactive art from video and television to computer networking and multimedia (Brecht 1987: 53-4).

9. The segment "This Is Your Final Warning!" does not permit the user to leave before reading the entire piece. It punishes premature attempts to depart with a special supplement, "Devil in a Dead Man's Underwear." Only crashing the computer can stop this unbearably banal poem (accompanied by voice and annoying sound effects).
10. For a different view by art historians who have theorized the period as apolitical and "indifferent" see Moira Roth (1977: 46-53); and Francis Francina (1999).
11. Kinetic Art and Nouvelle Tendance collectives (Groupe Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) in Paris, ZERO in Germany, Gruppo T and Gruppo N in Italy, and many others), researched, practiced, and theorized audience participation in visual art. Nicolas Schöffer's "CYSP I," 1956, for example, was programmed to respond electronically to its environment, and to involve the viewer as a key component, influencing how the work behaved over time. The best, most comprehensive overviews of the history of kinetic and participatory art remain Frank Popper's *Origins and Development of Kinetic Art* (1968) and *Art - Action and Participation* (1975).
12. For a discussion of the operations of metonymy in the interconnection of subjects, see Stiles, "Synopsis of the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) and Its Theoretical Significance" (1987: 22-31); and, more recently, Stiles' "Performance" (2003: 75).
13. The best example of such networks is the powerful resistance to World Trade and G8 globalization conferences. The current cultural desire for such a social, aesthetic, and political interchange accounts for why the Situationist International (SI) strategy of *détournement* remains so compelling. The theory of *détournement* suggests the "integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu...*détournement* within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which testifies to the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres (Situationist International 1958, reprinted in Stiles and Selz 1996: 702).

## COLLABORATIVE SYSTEMS: REDEFINING PUBLIC ART

Sharon Daniel

### Prologue: on authorship and publics

This essay is both a reflection on the politics of authorship and something like a manifesto on the social function of art. The subtitle, "redefining public art," references a process and a personal narrative. But this is not merely an exercise in anecdotal self-reflection. Rather, to articulate a theory of practice of context provision, I trace an autobiographical trajectory across a map of historical influences and plot a line that links my praxis to a constellation of social theories.

When I was first asked to write for a collection titled *Context Providers*, my practice involved developing systems for collaborative and collective authoring online.<sup>1</sup> I thought of the Internet as a public space and saw my work as "public art." But I was troubled by the delimitation of who and what could be considered "Public" in this context. Every definition of "Public" I have found includes the phrase "the people." It is a curious contradiction that in modern European languages, the phrase "the people" always also connotes the poor, the underprivileged, and the excluded. The same phrase simultaneously identifies the citizen or political subject (big "P" people) as well as the class that is excluded from politics—the marginalized and technologically disenfranchised (Agamben 2000). At this time I had started to wonder how, or if, public art practice could effectively exploit information technologies to create a more inclusive public sphere—one that would engage both the People and the people. The complex struggle over civil liberties and social rights in electronically mediated information space is materially different from the one on the street. There is another public outside.

When I began work on this essay, I lived in a part of east Oakland that could accurately be described as a post-industrial wasteland. My neighborhood was also home to the

homeless—a non-space, a marginal, semiautonomous zone in the midst of the urban mainstream. There was an HIV prevention program down the street that ran an open-access needle exchange three nights a week. For a few years, I volunteered at the exchange. I believed in the efficacy of needle exchange, and I wanted to know the people who came to swap needles. Most of them lived on the street, had no official identification—either because they had a criminal record or no fixed address—and therefore had no access to basic civic rights or social services. Their absence in the dataspace of the Public sphere had serious implications for them in the physical world. They were in a sense invisible—a kind of secret public.

I got to know one of the women—I'll call her A\_\_\_\_. She was sharp and funny when she was not depressed or violent. I learned a lot from A\_\_\_\_ about the third world inside the first. I learned that the realities of poverty, racism, social isolation, past trauma, sexual abuse, and sex-based discrimination can make a person, even an extraordinarily intelligent person, vulnerable to addiction and psychosis. I learned a lot from A\_\_\_\_ about desperation and about resilience.

The needle exchange was the last frayed layer of the social safety net for someone like A\_\_\_\_. Needle exchange programs are part of a larger therapeutic strategy called "harm reduction," which employs a kind of practical ethics: de-escalating moral conflict, recognizing the value and dignity of all individuals, facilitating communication, and providing information so each person involved in a given circumstance can see the other's point of view. To me, this seemed like a good model for the way a work of art might identify and engage its public.

### Art as Social Function

In 2001, not long after I first met A\_\_\_\_, I saw Atelier Van Lieshout's (2001) "A-Portable" at the Venice Biennale. [Fig. 1.2.1 and 1.2.2] "A-Portable" is a shipping container repurposed as a floating abortion clinic. It was designed to allow women from countries where abortion is illegal to terminate their pregnancies in international waters just outside national jurisdiction.

The text, which accompanied the exhibition, proposed a radical reconsideration of the social function of art.

To understand the work one must move from ontology, (what is art?) to pragmatism (what can art do?). Herein lies a possible revival of avant-garde politics—no longer historically "ahead", nor operating through shock and estrangement, but rather producing works that make things possible *right now*... (italics mine; Allen 2001)

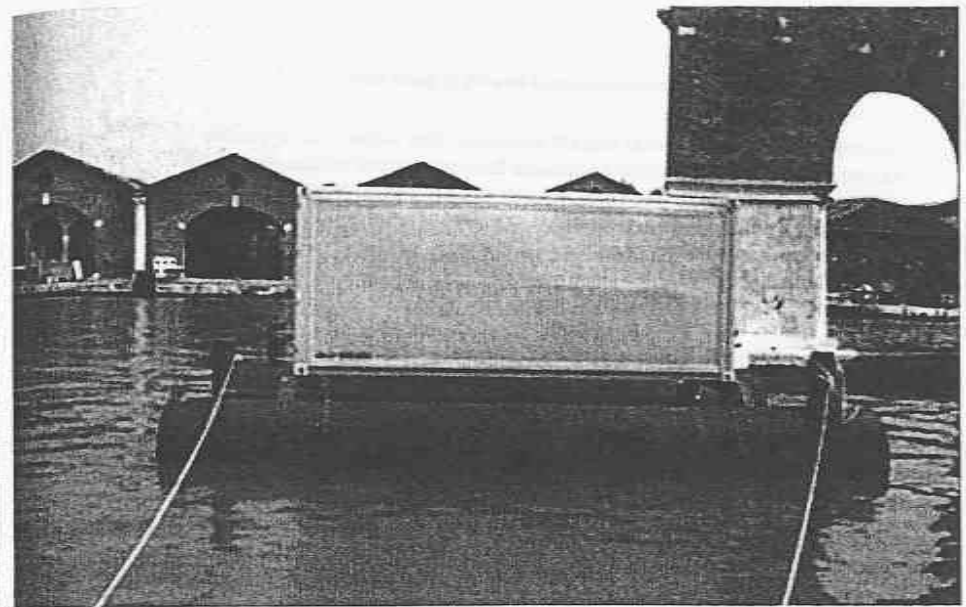


Figure 1.2.1. Atelier Van Lieshout's "A-Portable" installation at Venice Biennale 2000.



Figure 1.2.2. Atelier Van Lieshout's "A-Portable" interior view.

*Right now* is a schizophrenic moment. According to Fredric Jameson, who often describes culture in terms of pathology, "The postmodern, or late capitalism, has at least brought the epistemological benefit of revealing the ultimate structure of the commodity to be that of addiction itself (or, if you prefer, it has produced the very concept of addiction in all its metaphysical richness)" (Jameson 2004). The world is in a dissociative state. In the first world, we enjoy unparalleled wealth, which allows us to take pleasure in consuming an embarrassing array of goods and entertainments and to rely on technological innovation and scientific advances for communication, safety, and health. The first world is permeated by another, a "third world," not identified in terms of nation-states but rather as a state-of-being characterized by oppression, political disenfranchisement, disorder, and social disintegration on an unprecedented scale. Poverty is crime. Difference is terror. What can art do right now?

*Right now*, the figure of the citizen is eclipsed by that of the consumer—the most powerful minority in a world population dominated by other figures—the refugee, the homeless, the prisoner, the HIV positive, the addict, the squatter, the internally displaced, the racial other. For this majority, life is what Giorgio Agamben has called "bare life"—without power, without political agency, without political subjectivity. In Agamben's analysis, the state can only assert its power and affirm itself by separating "naked life" or biological life from its social and political agency—reducing the subject to a biological entity, a bare life preserved only as an expression of sovereign power. Bare life is an ontological matter that requires a pragmatic answer. For Agamben, "intellectuality and thought"—which I see as equivalent or necessary to self-representation and self-articulation—are forces that can reunite bare life to its "form"—its particularity, identity, subjectivity, political agency, and power of choice. What can art do to encourage and facilitate the intellectuality and thought of "other" political subjects? "Intellectuality and thought" are means of ethical resistance. Ethical resistance does not come from power but from lack of power and, "...is perhaps paradoxically the most powerful form that resistance can take" (Hoy 2005: 15–16).

Art is a privileged discourse linked historically to political aggression and personal arrogance. Artists concerned with the social and political function of art practice, those who "...wish to ethically engage the complexity of social life..." (Strathern 1999) need to *do something different*. As Van Lieshout's (2001) "A-Portable" shows, ethical engagement means both recognizing and realizing other subjects. This may require artists to rethink their own subject positions, revise their methodologies and aesthetics, and redefine public art practice. In contrast to the "shock and estrangement" that constituted the project of the aesthetic avant-garde, the project of ethical resistance both requires and produces an acceptance of each individual's particular, subjective perspective.

### Ethics and the avant-garde project

According to Slavoj Žižek, ethics depends upon the recognition of the symbolic universe of the other. This understanding of the ethical can inform the sociopolitical (the relation between the *public* and the *Public*) as well as the psychoanalytic (relations between individuals). In his essay "Formal Democracy and its Discontents," Žižek (1991: 156) develops a Lacanian definition of an "ethics of fantasy" adding to Jacques Lacan's maxim, "do not cede your desire," his own "intersubjective supplement."

Avoid as much as possible any violation of the fantasy space of the other, i.e., respect as much as possible the other's 'particular absolute,' the way he organizes his universe of meaning in a way absolutely particular to him. Such an ethic is neither imaginary (the point is not to love our neighbor as ourselves, insofar as he resembles ourselves, i.e., insofar as we see in him an image of ourselves) nor symbolic (the point is also not to respect the other on account of the dignity bestowed on him by his symbolic identification, by the fact that he belongs to the same symbolic community as ourselves, even if we conceive this community in the widest possible sense and maintain respect for him 'as a human being'). What confers on the other the dignity of a 'person' is not any universal-symbolic feature but precisely what is 'absolutely particular' about him, his fantasy, that part of him that we can be sure we can never share. (Žižek 1991)

Žižek's "intersubjective ethics of fantasy" bears a close resemblance to the "practical ethics" of harm reduction therapy. Each asserts that ethical relations require a recognition of the dignity of the other's world of meaning, not only in adherence to universal human rights and moral law, but in acceptance of the absolute particularity of the symbolic reality that defines the "other" as other. In contrast, the goal of the psychoanalytic process is, in part, to destroy the individual subject's fundamental fantasy, thus allowing her to acquire some distance from the central support of her symbolic reality. Similarly, the project of the avant-garde has been, in part, to disrupt or rupture, through critique, inversion, irony, parody, among others, the expectations or symbolic universe of its audience. But, if one accepts the possibility that the only ethical position one may assume relative to the "other" is to face the "other" with a lack of comprehension and accept this lack of comprehension—accepting the other as other—then one must agree that the avant-garde project is essentially unethical.

In the catalog for "Art for Whom," an exhibition organized by Richard Cork for the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1978, Cork calls the avant-garde impulse "fundamentally irresponsible" (Cork et al. 1978). The "collective statement," a ten-point

position paper written for the catalog by Cork and the artists included in *Art for Whom* (Conrad Atkinson, Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson, Islington Schools Environmental Project, Public Art Workshop, and Stephen Willats) insists that the routine modernist continuum of revolt and counter revolt must be replaced by integration in broadly based context. Points three and four of this position paper—also a kind of manifesto—read as follows:

3. We refuse to accept that art today must inevitably be regarded as a marginal, mercantile and misunderstood activity, alienated from most members of its potential audience.

4. We are convinced that art must be transformed into a progressive force for change in the future. Understanding and accepting this premise, artists practicing now should inhabit and understand the context, perspective and social environment of the "other," or audience/participant, and seek to change that social environment for the sake of more human and egalitarian future (Cork et al. 1978).

This collective statement articulates the position that art and its social context should be inextricably linked and that art can function critically and ethically without being oppositional, disruptive, or alienating. According to Cork and the artists included in *Art for Whom*, this requires a commitment to a new model of exchange, communication, collaboration, and mutuality; an understanding that the meaning of "Art" is historically contingent; a recognition that productive and effective works of art are dependent upon relationships between people and not the product of one individual; and a desire among artists to function within the social fabric of the audience/participant's daily life (Cork et al. 1978). Here, Cork has provided a brief outline of what I will call "context dependence," a term coined by one of Cork's artists, Stephen Willats. Context dependence represents a conceptualization of art practice that produces a shift in the role of the artist and in the function of aesthetics—stretching the concept of artistic creation from making content to making context.

### Chance Operations

"The end of the avant-garde is only the end of a particular western tradition."

— Robert Stam<sup>2</sup>

"...instead of the possibility of repetition, we are faced in life with the unique qualities and characteristics of each occasion..."

— John Cage, *Diary: How to Improve the World  
(You Will Only Make Matters Worse)*

John Cage was perhaps the first "context provider." He initiated a transition from avant-garde practice to context-dependent practices. When Cork, Willats, et. al. published their position paper for the Serpentine in London in 1978, I was studying opera at the University of Texas in Austin. Several years earlier, under the influence of percussionist friends, I had begun to follow and study the work of John Cage. Opera is, in general, highly deterministic, both in form and content. The works of Cage that captured my attention were generated through chance operations. At the time I was not entirely conscious that the coexistence of these two interests implied a certain contradiction. I realized much later, having abandoned the formal strictures and narrative certainties of the opera for the intellectual freedoms of conceptual art, that Cage's work informed all of my subsequent thinking on contingency, context, and collaboration—as well as my early experiments with interactive installation and my own attempts to use random and chance operations to escape authorial perspective.<sup>3</sup>

Many of Cage's compositions such as "4' 33'" were open systems in which the audience/participant, or subject, was constructed as interpreter, author, and actant in the system. In "4' 33'" Cage used chance operations to "compose" a temporal frame, which played off of the formal conventions of the recital performance. David Tudor sat at the piano opening and closing the keyboard in precisely timed "movements" framing a silence that revealed the sounds produced by the astonished audience. The audience experiencing "4' 33'" had an opportunity to listen to whatever there was to hear (see, e.g., Cage 1990: 25–27). Cage repositioned his audience as author/interpreter. He provided a context for his audience, which required that they listen, hear, make sound, and understand all sound as music. In "4' 33'" Cage eliminated the distinction between musical and environmental sound, thus achieving a fusion of art and life (Bernstein 2000).

It is clear that there is both a causal and a philosophical connection between Cage and contemporary conceptual, ethical, and dialogic art practices. By sharing the creative process with audience-participants, Cage rejected the Modernist avant-garde's emphasis on the author (the stylistic and the psychoanalytic) in favor of contextual inter-authorship<sup>4</sup> with a specific audience and/or site. This approach corresponds, in part, with what the Marxist literary critic Raymond Williams has called *alternative culture*. In his model of



cultural hegemony, Williams contrasts alternative culture with *oppositional culture* in relation to *dominant culture*. Both alternative and oppositional culture strive for social change, but oppositional culture, which would include the historical, radical avant-garde, relies on tactics of subversion, rupture, and confrontation, whereas alternative cultural strategies offer new models and experiences without violating the symbolic order of dominant culture (Williams 1989: 384).

With "4' 33'" Cage initiated a body of work that was simultaneously disruptive or oppositional (consistent with the perspective of the radical avant-garde) and alternative in a constructive sense. By identifying "4' 33'" as a musical composition, and situating its performance in relation to the formal conventions of the recital hall, Cage engaged the radical project of the avant-garde. "4' 33'" subverted the expectations (or symbolic universe) of the concert audience. Through this transgression Cage deconstructed the notion of the masterwork—questioning the power and control of individuals (author/composer/artist) and institutions in the Modernist era. Alternatively, each movement of "4' 33'" drew a frame around historically contingent phenomena and random events—collapsing compositional method into an act of contextualization and initiating a context-dependent practice that liberated the work of art from stasis and closure.

Near the end of the 1960s, Cage was increasingly focused on the relation between art and political and social structures. Cage explains in his essay "The Future of Music" (1974) how a work of art might provide a model for constructing an ideal world.

Less anarchic kinds of music give examples of less anarchic states of society. The masterpieces of Western music exemplify monarchies and dictatorships. Composer and conductor; king and prime minister. By making musical situations, which are analogies to desirable social circumstances, which we do not yet have, we make music suggestive and relevant to the serious questions, which face Mankind. (Cage 1979: 183)

Cage's intent was political. He conceived of his works as alternative epistemologies that might lead to a radical reshaping of political and social structures. Cage's political aims were shared among his students and colleagues, such as Christian Wolff, whose compositional technique involved analysis of the inner politics of the performing ensemble and the construction of games and rule-based systems that yielded works resembling ideal social communities (Bernstein 1999). Wolff described the aesthetic and compositional goal of his work "Changing the System."

To turn the making of music into a collaborative and transforming activity (performer into composer into listener into composer into performer etc.), the co-operative character of the activity to be the exact source of the music. To stir up, through the production of the music, a sense of the

political conditions in which we live and how these might be changed, in the direction of democratic socialism. (Logos Foundation, 2003)<sup>5</sup>

By authorizing a trajectory in art practice that privileges the experience of the audience over the intentions of the artist and exploits the work of art as a tool for modeling alternative social systems, Cage made a major break with the project of the avant-garde and Modernism. When framing contexts and modeling social structures displaced composition and expression in Cage's work, there was both a beginning and an end, a "death of the author."

### Deaths of the author

"We know that to restore to writing its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author."

— Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"

Cage's "4' 33'" was first performed in 1955. In 1934, more than thirty years before Barthes declared "the death of the author," Walter Benjamin wrote "The Author as Producer." Benjamin challenged the author to resist colonizing, appropriation and (mis) representation, to change the technique of traditional artistic production, to become a revolutionary worker against bourgeois culture, to intervene, like a worker, in the "means of production" (Benjamin 1978). Benjamin urged the author to become an "operating" author. He warned that a correct "tendency" was not enough—that standing "beside the proletariat" as a benefactor or patron was "an impossible place."

In his essay "The Artist as Ethnographer," Hal Foster (1996) returns to these historical and conceptual models as the context for his own argument.

One of the most important interventions in the relation between artistic authority and cultural politics is "The Author as Producer" ... A glance at this text reveals that two oppositions that still plague the reception of art—*aesthetic quality versus political relevance*, *form versus content*—were "familiar and unfruitful" as long ago as 1934. Benjamin sought to overcome these oppositions in representation through the third term of production, but neither opposition has disappeared.

Foster recounts the history of the influence of Benjamin's essay on various types of art practice in the 1970s and 1980s but focuses a critical analysis on what he characterizes as "a new paradigm structurally similar to the old 'Author as Producer' model...[which] has emerged in advanced art on the left: the artist as ethnographer" (Foster 1996: 172), a paradigm

which he traces back to the influence of Benjamin's essay. Foster echoes Benjamin's implicit concerns, reshaping them in a contemporary context: that the desire of artists to go out into the community, to engage sites not identified as art spaces, may be primarily a way for the artist to transcend the limits of personal identity or style and appropriate otherness; that the artist may ethnographically plot her own existence in an alternative site to appropriate the community as an identity and absorb it into her own autobiographical exegesis. Or worse, that an artist may un-self-reflexively assume the ability to represent a community from an external and possibly condescending, colonizing, appropriative, or romanticized perspective—as the community may then come to be identified with and through that perspective.<sup>6</sup> The problem of “projection” in Foster's terms is an ethical problem.

When the other is admired as playful in representation, subversive of gender, and so on, might it be a projection of the anthropologist, artist, critic, or historian? In this case an ideal practice might be projected onto the field of the other, which is then asked to reflect it as if it were not only authentically indigenous but innovatively political. (Foster 1996: 183)

Foster argues that the model of the “artist as ethnographer” exploits anthropology's “privileged tropes” of alterity, cultural contextuality, interdisciplinarity, and self-reflexivity. For Foster it appears that the appropriated discourse of anthropology is favored primarily for its status as a “compromising” discourse that already participates in the two contradictory models dominating contemporary art and criticism; on the one hand, incorporating the linguistic turn that reconfigured the social as symbolic order and advanced the death of the author and, on the other hand, a longing for a referent, context and identity. Foster (1996: 183) complains that

[w]ith a turn to this split discourse of anthropology, artists and critics can resolve these contradictory models magically: they can take up the guises of cultural semiologist and contextual fieldworker, they can continue and condemn critical theory, they can relativize and recenter the subject, all at the same time.

But this statement may be a “projection” of the type that Foster warns artists against. I prefer to invert his critique and restate it as a proposal, for example:

Through a critical reevaluation and adaptation of the discourse and methods of ethnography artists may productively explore contradictory models and discover new praxes in the space in-between: they may take up new subject positions (semiologist, field worker, etc.) in order to interrogate modes of representation. As such, they may simultaneously

continue and condemn critical theory. (And yes! Why not? Isn't that what theorizing is for? Is it not a continuous re-thinking of the real that keeps us from merely accepting reality as it is?) They may question the nature of subjectivity and systems of subjectification, by both relativizing and recentering the subject, all at the same time.

Foster is justifiably concerned about the probability of reductive, idealistic representations—about primitivizing, colonizing, or mythologizing, about identity (essentialism) and identification (appropriation) in the work of the artist-as-ethnographer. But he fails to see the potential escape from the collapse of difference through identification or mythologizing essentialism that is already articulated in Benjamin's conclusion that, “what matters therefore is, the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—that is, readers or spectators into collaborators...” (italics mine; Benjamin 1978: 233)

Foster's assumption is that the artist-as-ethnographer will engage in observation to produce a representation and that any representation so produced will become a projection of the artist's own perspective and assumptions. Certainly this is a likely outcome of many authorial approaches. However, Benjamin does not propose a new approach to representation but the construction of a new apparatus that provides a context for self-representation. He asserts that the author should operate as a context provider, avoiding representation, not speaking for others, but providing them with the means to speak for themselves.

#### Spectators into collaborators

“If at the end of the twentieth century one were inventing a method of enquiry by which to grasp the complexity of social life, one might wish to invent something like the social anthropologist's ethnographic practice.”

— Marilyn Strathern, *Property, Substance & Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things*

British artist Stephen Willats' practice of “behavioral art” in the 1970s appropriated methods from social anthropology and ethnographic practice without colonizing, mythologizing, or essentializing. Behavioral art shifted responsibility for the production, analysis, synthesis, and representation of content from the “artist/ethnographer” to the “participant/interlocutor.” By framing a context (directing the participants to consider a specific set of issues) and devising a process to facilitate self-analysis and self-

representation, Willats avoided the pitfalls Foster ascribes to the artist-as-ethnographer and realized the "apparatus" described by Benjamin.

Willats is the author of *Art and Social Function*, which was originally published in 1976. It had long been out of print and was apparently much sought after when it was reissued, with a new preface by the author, in 2000. I had never heard of Willats or behavioral art until I discovered a used copy of the 2000 edition of the book at a shop in Berkeley (this was only a few months after I began working with injection drug users at the needle exchange, distributing disposable cameras and cheap audio tape recorders to allow them to participate in a project of self-representation online). The book was printed in an unusual format—only 4 1/8" by 5 3/4" and about 3/4" thick; its odd shape (like a little handbook or field guide) and its title caught my eye.

In the preface, which I read while standing in the bookstore, Willats (2000: 14) explained that, for him, art has a social function when

the artist directly uses the audience's world of references...Instead of presenting a preferred view, i.e. presuming that the artist's views will be seen as meaningful by his/her audience, the artist embraces the concept of pluralism and accepts the relativity of the audience's perception and the context-dependency of this work. The artist directs the audience's attention towards a given view, and provides the means to examine it in a particular way, but does not prescribe specific meaning that should be brought to bear on it. Instead the audience experiences the work and searches for a new meaning from within the realm of what is already meaningful to them.

When I read this I was struck by how closely Willats' approach to the relation between artist and audience resembled Žižek's "intersubjective ethics" (and the "practical ethics" of harm reduction therapy). And as I read more, I realized that his practice provided an excellent example of Williams' notion of alternative culture—a frame of particular significance to my work in this moment of my reading.

The book includes detailed descriptions and illustrations of Willats' "West London Social Resource Project," "Edinburgh Social Model Construction Project," and the "Meta Filter." The chapters on the West London project described a complex, process-intensive, community-based, participatory ethnography framed both as "social resource" and a work of art. It was clear from the illustrations of completed workbook pages and public "register boards" that the West London project was designed to facilitate interpretive and authorial experiences for participants, who were given an opportunity to analyze and question codes of behavior and meaning within their own social environment. Willats solicited participation from door to door for what could be called a "neighborhood specific" work. He developed workbooks, questionnaires, and other materials that addressed the

social and physical "coding structures" (Willats 1979) present in the neighborhood. The framework provided for analysis was non-normative and authorized rethinking these codes. Participants were invited from four social groups from West London who initially saw each other as geographically, economically, and socially dissimilar. The project was structured to facilitate interaction between these groups. [Fig. 1.2.3]

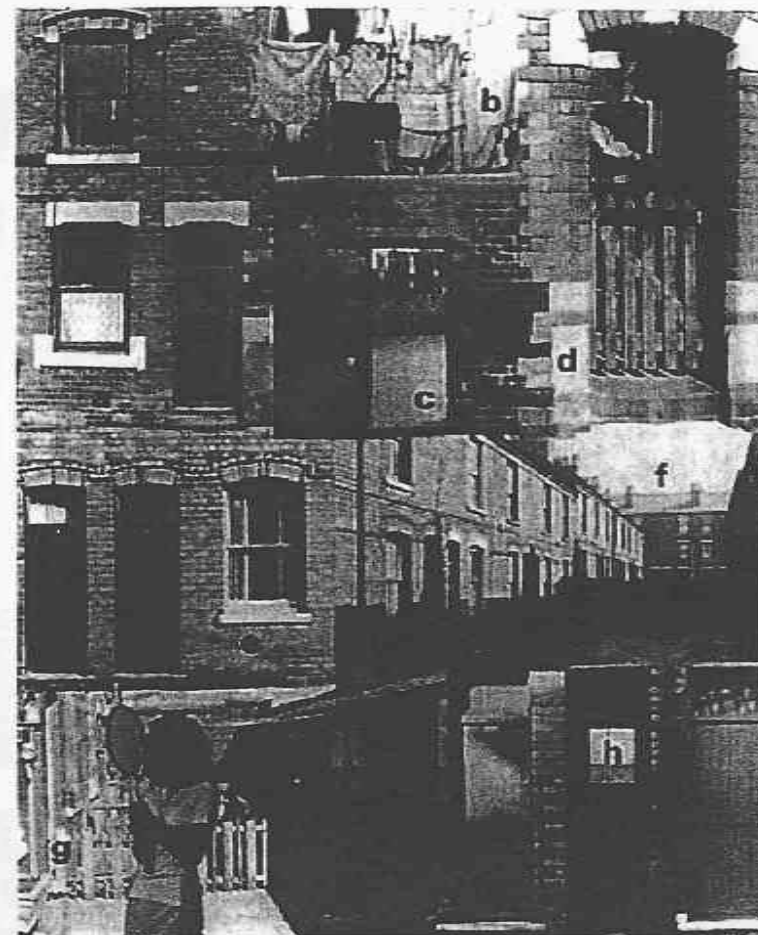


Figure 1.2.3. Steven Willats, Poster for "West London Social Resource Project."



First, workbooks were distributed and participants were asked to examine their environment by following a series of daily exercises to identify common perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Then participants were asked to describe how their physical environment met their needs and draw or diagram any alterations and changes they would like to make. Participants were questioned about their own homes and gardens and then about their neighborhood and the West London area around their neighborhood—

including associations they might have to images of the neighborhood and area. This process was carefully structured so that each participant had time to thoughtfully examine the community's social and physical environment and develop his or her own analytical perspective. Participation was cultivated through visits to participants' homes. The workbook pages that showed the results of this process were displayed on public register boards in local libraries. The public exposure of underlying neighborhood relationships through the register board, displays, and polls increased the participants' understanding of social groups outside their own and created new opportunities for communication and community action. "While no systematic investigation was made into the effect of the project on the participants, they did carry out the intended re-modeling procedures" (Willats 2000: 49). [Fig. 1.2.4]

*Art and Social Function* (Willats 2000) is 240 pages long. One hundred pages at the center of the book are devoted to illustrations of the West London project—scaled-down pictures of completed workbook pages and photographs of the public register boards. The workbook pages reveal the handwritten descriptions, idiosyncratic drawings, and thoughtful diagrams produced by the participants. Seen as often illegible, tiny scrawls and figures in the pages of the little book, these traces of a dialogic and very personalized analytic process function as both evidence and anecdote.

An anecdote is, "the literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real" (Fineman 1991: 67 quoted in Gallop 2002). The anecdote, however literary, is always knotted to the real. In its particularity, it "interrupts what is too fixed, too abstract, too eternal and a-historical" (Gallop 2002).<sup>6</sup> The number and specificity of the workbook pages reproduced in the book renders an excess of the personal. *Art and Social Function* both documents and contributes to a project of making knowledge that opens to the real. With "West London," Willats rejected the notion of a dominant or universal symbolic and focused on the personal and particular. In so doing he adopted the ethical position, described by Žižek—that is, assuming a distance from his own symbolic order and accepting the symbolic order of the "other." He demonstrated this ethic; first, by privileging the everyday—understanding that through personal stories of everyday life, with which we either intentionally or inadvertently articulate our individual symbolic order, we establish the possibility for an ethical social space—and second, by respecting the ability of the participant community to resolve the questions framed by the project from within their own symbolic order—what Willats would call their organization of a world of meaning. [Fig. 1.2.5]

When I first picked up *Art and Social Function*, I was struck by a seeming contradiction between the social-scientific attitude (method and tone) and the highly personal quality of the drawings and writing on the reproduced workbook pages. The language Willats used to describe each phase of the project was formal and theoretical, but the illustrations produced, for me, a sense of the personal—a living image of the door-to-door visits, the workbook sessions in the homes, the details of their interiors, the social interaction at the library. There was something so intimate about the drawing of the mantelpiece, the curve and wobble of the handwritten answer to "describe your ideal existence." I later

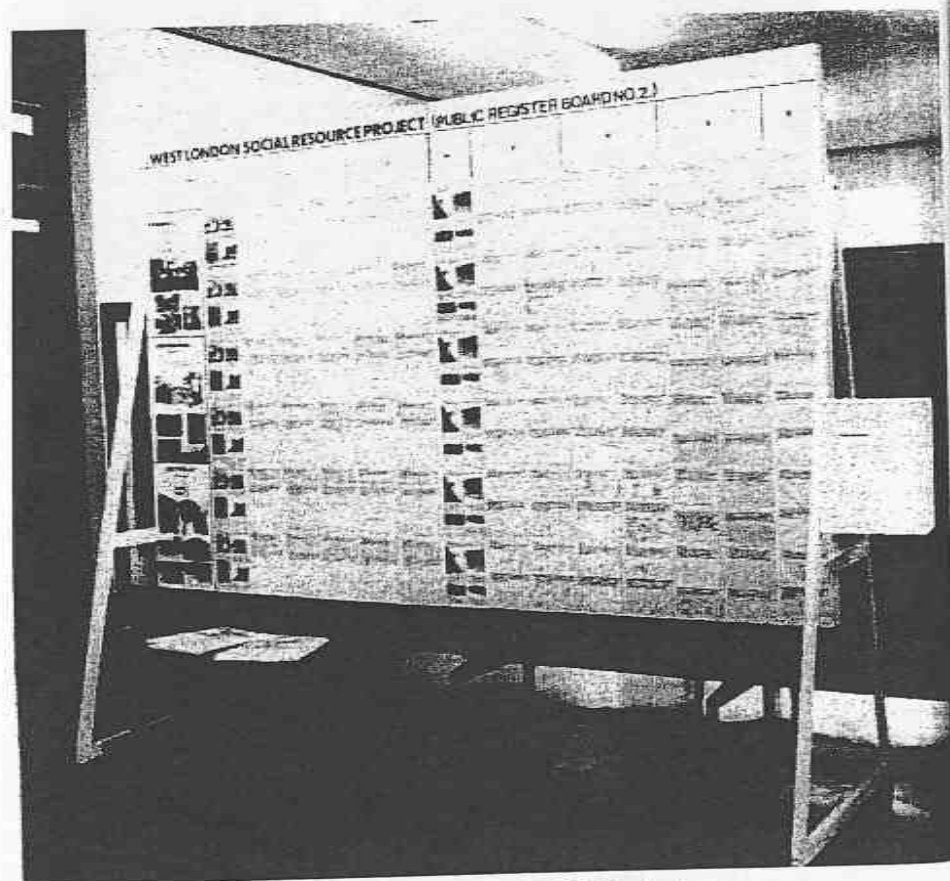


Figure 1.2.4. Stephen Willats, "West London Social Resource Project" Register Board.





been looking for a historical model—something beyond Cage's "silence"—to authorize and inform my own dialogic approach at the needle exchange. When I saw the pictures of the "Meta Filter" at the end of the book, like stills from an old science fiction film, I knew I had also discovered a useful exemplar of thinking at the intersection of context dependency and information technology. [Fig. 1.2.6]

Willats had been developing what he referred to as his "machine works" since the early 1960s. The "Meta Filter" generated an interactive process, a kind of analytic word game that two "operators," or participants, used as a tool for cooperative analysis (Willats 2000: 212). It seemed obvious that, even in the 1960s and 1970s, Willats' behavioral art process could translate easily into interactive computer interfaces in which the machine might stand in for the artist/ethnographer and shift relations with interlocutor/participants. This translation would necessarily produce both new possibilities and new potential problems. The "Meta Filter" was designed to engage two individuals who may or may not know each other into a joint analysis of the codes governing interpersonal behavior. "A formal interactive structure is established which operating partners use as a neutral tool for externalizing what is mutual in their perceptions of interpersonal behavior... it is intended that it will increase the operators' awareness of such structures as basic elements within any human organization..." (Willats 2000: 212).

"Meta Filter" is an artwork, which is context dependent and in this respect it is similar to "The West London Social Resource Project" but "Meta Filter" depends on its context in a quite different way. Instead of referring to the participant/operator's world, the machine and its interface are "neutral" and the work is "loaded" by the reference worlds that participants bring to it. (Willats 2000: 215)

Willats explains his problematic claim regarding the neutrality of the system by detailing a process of participatory design during which the responses of two test groups "representing two different outlooks" (Willats 2000: 213) were recorded and incorporated into the design of the system.

Willats' machine works were informed by his study of cybernetics and information theory, and the language he uses to describe them is grounded there; however, with its focus on social codes and dialogic processes, the "Meta Filter" also represents an early attempt to exploit information technology for social inclusion. Willats' theory of the "social function" of art emerges out of an ethos that I share—one that engages both the practical ethics employed in harm reduction therapy and the subjectivism promoted by the "feminist" approach to research method and software design. Although Willats says nothing about feminism (or harm reduction) in *Art and Social Function*, I can actually imagine him in conversation and in accordance with feminists on the ethics of authorship, the politics of collaboration, and the relation of subjects and systems.

### Authorship/authority/audience

What characterizes a "feminist approach?" A rejection of the desirability or even the possibility of value-free research; an emphasis on collaboration; an attempt to showcase a multiplicity of viewpoints and perspectives; and to encourage others to find their "voice," in the metaphoric sense of "voice" used to "denote the public expression of a particular perspective on self and social life—the effort to represent one's own experience, rather than accepting the representations of more powerful others" (Cassell 1998).

In her essay "Storytelling as a Nexus of Change in the Relationship between Gender and Technology: A Feminist Approach to Software Design," Justine Cassell (1998) suggests that the principals of feminist research practice offer a solution to the problem of power in the complex relations between author/authority and audience. In feminist software design authority is distributed to collaborating participants by allowing most of the design and construction to be carried out by the participants rather than the designer. The role of author, and in some cases the role of system designer, is given to the participant. Subjective and experiential knowledge is valued in the context of computer use, which is encouraged for many different kinds of users in many different contexts. The feminist software designer's goal is to give the "user" a tool to express something about the truth of her existence—to tell her story.

Anecdotes and stories are distinct from narrative in that they describe, rather than prescribe, real-lived experience. Storytelling facilitates the construction of self and the exploration of social roles. It allows individual subjects to inform others about their beliefs and experiences and to redefine and negotiate the "norms" that govern their participation in communities of practice—including that of art practice and software design.

Much like Willats, Cassell proposes that software designers (and artists), "focus on the subjective, experiential, everyday lived experiences of individuals, emphasize collaboration, and attempt to promote the distribution of authority" (Cassell 1998). The principles of feminist software design provide an ethical framework in which to pursue the exploitation and development of information technologies as environments for self-representation. However, whereas the increasing flexibility of digital technology may make a more balanced relation between artist/designer and participant possible, this is not always achieved. "Real collaboration is often undermined by the authority of the artist, who retains control of the technology. The apparent autonomy given to a participating spectator is often a false front, simply a product of digital technology's ability to offer more varied, but still strictly controlled routes through a closed set of prescribed material" (Kelly 1997). The transparency of *input to output*, the accessibility of control parameters and the balance of open-to-closed data/information structures are limitations imposed by a system that either establishes or undermines the collaborative role of the audience and, thus, express the artist's authority. When addressing the distribution of

authority in software and systems design, there is an important distinction to be made between "interactivity" and "collaboration."

Interactor, participant, and collaborator are fundamentally different subject positions. Interactive systems address their subjects as users. Mapping is the kernel of intersubjective communication in system and interface design. "Interactive" systems often, either intentionally or thoughtlessly, obscure the "mapping" of input to system output. For example, many contemporary computer-based works rely on sensing technologies that "average" input, like gesture or population density within a space. Such systems appropriate the body of the viewer, typically called the user, to drive the system. This user is reduced to mass or velocity, or trajectory within a prescribed sensing field—often with no opportunity to know how her presence has affected her environment and no means with which to learn the system to produce results based on her own, as opposed to the artist's, intentions. This sort of interactive system uses the user.

Two philosophies of mapping are common in technology-based art practice. These could be described in musical or textual terms as phrase based and note (or, letter or word based). Phrase-based mapping is assumed to "reward" the user under all conditions. This philosophy is based on the premise that the system should respond with aesthetically pleasing output (as defined by the artist/designer), regardless of the level of understanding or virtuosity the user develops in relation to the system interface. Phrase-based systems privilege the author of the system as artist/composer and merely allow the user to trigger or reorganize already aesthetically viable and vetted content. Note, letter- or word-based systems allow the user to become a participant—to develop her own content based on her own intentions within the limitations prescribed by the system and its interfaces. This approach expresses a higher level of respect for the subjective perspective of the participant and, to varying degrees, refigures authorial interrelations. Some systems are designed to be "learnable" to varying degrees. Learnable systems allow the participant to develop an understanding of the structure and content of the system (how it maps input to output) and use it to express her own intentions within the limitations prescribed by the system. When note-, letter-, or word-based systems are designed to "learn" from the interaction of participants, the agency of the participant is increased. But when participants are allowed to contribute data to a system, it becomes a *collaborative system*.

### Politics of collaboration

The Vietnam War Memorial has been transformed from a monument into a collaborative system interface. Because it was not originally intended to be a site for public contribution, but emerged as such, spontaneously and seemingly out of necessity, it represents a specifically political formulation and application of the concept of collaborative systems in the public sphere.

Traditionally, public architecture, memorials, and monuments articulate narratives of power in an attempt to produce histories and foster historical consciousness. This particular memorial embodies the recognition of a cultural impossibility—the impossibility of a return to traditional representation from a single point of view in contemporary public art and politics.

The contested place of the Vietnam War in the political imagination meant that dead and returning soldiers were not understood as heroes in the universal sense of past wars. In the first five years after the war ended, more than fifty-eight thousand Vietnam veterans committed suicide. The number of veterans that took their own lives was greater than the number killed in combat. By 1980 thirty thousand Vietnam veterans were in American prisons (Hass 1998).<sup>10</sup> Returning Vietnam War veterans were seen as emblems of a bad war and the malaise of the nation. There was then and is now no consensus either culturally or politically about this war—and there was no possibility of finding a coherent and singular perspective from which to represent it.

The power of Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam War Memorial (VWM) lies in the presence of the names of the dead. Lin said that for her the shape of the monument "is not a 'V' but a circle to be completed by the thoughts and feelings that visitors bring to it" (Lin 2000). However, she did not predict that visitors would complete this circle through acts of contribution. Lin's design alone was unable to resolve public memory of the Vietnam War. Instead, it inspired hundreds of thousands to bring their own memorials to the Wall. Day after day, the Wall provides a monumental frame around small gestures, narratives written in the first person, individually authored memorials to lives lost in large-scale social, political, and cultural crises. Through these contributions, individuals have taken responsibility for representing their own grief and annexed a space for dialogue, self-representation, and self-narration across the boundaries of class, race, and politics.

The transformation of the VWM from monument to interface has established a new paradigm for a form of memorial that is multivocal, where no single perspective is assumed and thus a unified image, a monolithic presence, is inappropriate; where a space is made—a "silence" created (in Cage's sense)—for the community to represent and interpret loss on their own terms.

In comparison, the individual works that directly referenced 9/11 in Paul Virilio's exhibition on accident and catastrophe, "Unknown Quantity"<sup>11</sup>—even Wolfgang Staehle's 24-hour webcam broadcast of the panorama of lower Manhattan—somehow collapse into banality and fail to represent the effect of the event. The reproduction of the skyscraper, the quintessential monument to global capital, in the plans to rebuild the World Trade Center site is indicative of how traditional art and architecture are, by definition and by nature, incapable of resisting the force of power and oppression. This inability is inextricably linked to traditions of authorship and monumentalism. In the face of catastrophic global upheaval, poverty, and terror, there is a crisis of representation that renders these traditions both obsolete and objectionable.



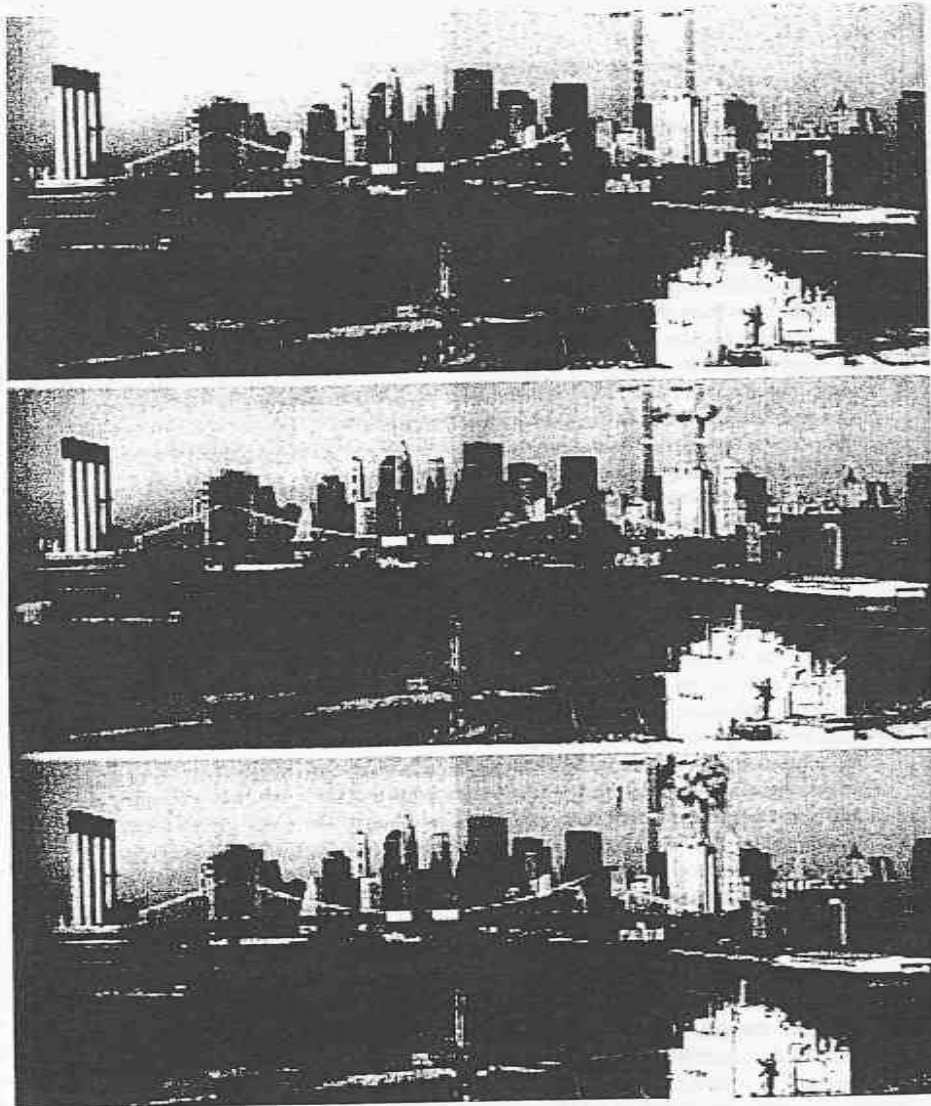


Figure 1.2.7. Wolfgang Staehle, "Untitled, 9/11," 2001, live video projection.

Earlier I stated that artists who wish to ethically engage need to "do something different." Right now, in this schizophrenic cultural moment of global inequality, it is politically imperative that the socioeconomic-political other engage in collective self-representation. I believe that this can be facilitated in the context of collaborative systems, either spontaneous or intentionally framed as a works of public art. Thus far I have attempted to bring together Cage's "silence," Willats' ethnographic systems, Cassell's feminist subjectivism, and my own critique of the ethical shortcomings of interactive interface design to formulate a theory of art practice that has the potential to address the crisis of representation right now. Right now we have the opportunity and the need to do something different—to link public art practice and information technology facilitate social inclusion, to produce a productive mechanism for dialogue, to provide a context for multiple voices to bear witness to their world as a form of critical resistance. [Fig 1.2.7]

There are potentially significant and, for some, rather frightening political implications in the notion of a shift away from the work of art as a closed system of representation and interpretation to one that is emergent, multivocal, and social. In part, this is because the modernist notion of authorship is closely linked to that of subjectivity itself. The subject defined by and identified with authorial perspective is threatened if "audience as viewer" becomes "audience as collaborator." Change in the dynamics of power always produces anxiety for those with power.

#### Systems and subjects

"Anxiety over prospect of total systemic change is equivalent to that of loss of self... The fear with which this prospect immediately fills us is then to all intents and purposes the same as the fear of death..."

— Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," 2004

Is it possible, if paradoxical, to attempt to develop a theory of subjectivity that "begins with the position of the 'other'?" (Oliver 2001). This presents the prospect of "total change" within the system of subjectification—the process of differentiation between self and other. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler has theorized that oppression and domination are at the heart of the formation of subjectivity itself. Social oppression and dominance are reflections of this. Oppression creates the demand for recognition. The struggle for power or recognition is a result of the pathology of oppression. This is a feedback loop, a complex system of subjectification and othering, for which there is seemingly no "outside"—from which there is seemingly no escape.

The fundamental presupposition of all systems is that the system itself cannot be changed (Jameson 2004). Given this inherent contradiction, the desire for change in



any system—political, social, or psychological—may seem utopian, idealized, and impractical. In his essay "The Politics of Utopia," Fredric Jameson claims, "Utopia is somehow negative. It is most authentic when we cannot imagine it. Its function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future . . . to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined" (Jameson 2004: 46). Yet Jameson encourages us to construct a political imaginary in resistance to this closure, to take "unimaginable mental liberties" with structures whose modification seems impossible, to make the most radical demand possible of a system, one which "could not be fulfilled or satisfied without transforming the system beyond recognition, and which would at once usher in a society structurally distinct from this one in every conceivable way..." (Jameson 2004: 36), to combine imagining and theorizing to attempt to step outside the system, but simultaneously hold on to the knowledge of what it is, in each moment, to remain inside it?

Willats turned to cybernetics and systems theory for a set of theoretical tools with which to examine human behavior and the coding structures of social systems. Cybernetics also provides a thorough analysis of the dualities of system and self, observer and observed—from self-regulation (homeostasis) through self-organization (autopoiesis) to self-evolution (emergence). Cybernetics offers both productive and destructive ways of thinking about the boundaries of the human subject and the "apparatuses" we use to cross them. By radically rethinking the subject as a system, we can imagine new models and new political formulations that are not entirely circumscribed by the dualities of inside/outside, subjectification/oppression.

Katherine Hayles notes that "of all the implications that first-wave cybernetics conveyed, perhaps none was more disturbing and potentially revolutionary than the idea that the boundaries of the human subject are constructed rather than given" (Hayles 1999). If the subject is constructed and its boundary frame is fluid or flexible, then this boundary crossing poses a threat to the subject of liberal humanism. Discussing this notion in her essay "Liberal Subjectivity Imperiled: Norbert Wiener and Cybernetic Anxiety," Hayles relates the story of Gregory Bateson's famous question to his graduate students, "Is a blind man's cane part of the man?"

The question aimed to spark a mind-shift. Most of his students thought that human boundaries are naturally defined by epidermal surfaces. Seen from the cybernetic perspective coalescing into awareness during and after World War II, however cybernetic systems are constituted by flows of information. In this viewpoint, cane and man join in a single system, for the cane funnels to the man essential information about his environment... (Hayles 1999: 84)

Here Hayles and Bateson describe the cybernetic collapse of subject, technology, and information into a single perceptual/experiential system. I would like to embrace the cybernetic finding that the boundaries of the human subject are constructed rather than given and to adopt this notion of cybernetic collapse to reimagine the relation between subject and system, inside and outside, self and other. Where the boundaries between individuals, communities, information, and technologies blur, subject relations may become mobile, transient, and recombinant.

### Complex systems

One example from systems theory that provides an interesting model for thinking about the relation of subject to system is the cellular automata. Cellular automata are self-evolving or emergent systems that extend in space and unfold in time according to local laws. The automata is a field or frame, usually visualized as a two- or three-dimensional grid of cells or pixels. Each cell or pixel may "behave" independently at each "step" in time based on a table of rules and a given initial condition. The table of rules is a set of definitions for the behavior of each pixel or cell in relation to the state of each neighboring pixel or cell. A global state emerges from the local interactions of discrete entities in an iterative and evolving system. In emergent systems such as cellular automata, subjectivity is socialized. The system itself functions both as an individual subject and a "community" of subjects.

Cellular automata exemplify a collapse of the binary opposition of autonomy and community and embody an oscillating, productive tension between the individual and the social, which suggests the potential of a new subject position, one I will call the "system\_subject."<sup>12</sup> For the system\_subject, the cybernetic collapse is mobile; it may be reversed, inverted, repeated, and revised. The enlightenment model of the individual "I" is displaced by a contingency that may function as a single entity or a distributed network of entities within a system narrative.

### It is difficult to imagine our "selves" in this way

Years ago, just out of graduate school, I worked as a freelance illustrator's freelance illustrator. Much of our work involved creating ink-on-PET film drawings of machines in "exploded" view. An exploded view or diagram shows the parts of an object separated and suspended in space as though a small explosion had just occurred at the center of the object. When I try to imagine my "self" in terms of the system\_subject, I have to picture an animated "exploding" machine diagram. The elements fly apart, merge into new forms, freeze momentarily, and are redistributed, reorganized, and, perhaps,

renovated before they coalesce again and emerge, now in another form. I try to imagine this simultaneously from the perspective of the machine (system), its operator/ animator, and one or any number of individual elements that are repurposed, renovated, reformed in each collapse. In this example, the system, a narrative of dynamic, recombinant, and emergent relations between elements (which stand for individual subjects) is a context (social, political, technological, and informational) in which it is possible to sustain simultaneous, yet diverse, embedded perspectives at multiple levels of scale. The machine, its diagram, its narrative, its elements and their relations, its operations, its operator/ animator, the context, and the entire multiple and particular coextensive perspectives, together, comprise what I call here, the *system\_subject*.

### System and narrative

System and narrative, community, and individuality are traditionally understood to be antinomies, but in the *system\_subject*, particularities and relations between particulars are the key to constructing and reconstructing community—thus perpetuating the evolution or emergence of the system and its historically contingent narrative.

Acts of imaginative speculation, differentiation, interpretation, and traversal are essentially narrative. Narrative and its biographical contingencies open systems of all types up to historical specificity and context dependence. If an individual consciously contributes her particular, historical narrative to a sociopolitical dialogue, her relation to her community is realized. This relation, allowed to flourish, produces the *system\_subject*. For the *system\_subject*, narrative is absolutely particular. Here there is no cinematic "suture," no stereotype, no loss of awareness or identity, no identification with an ego ideal. The individual subject "does not lose its qualities but may be re-qualified" (Hayles 2000). Specificity remains but the potential for recombination is foregrounded. Biography is reinvented in the emergent *system\_subject* as both individual and communal, narratively, and historically contingent.<sup>13</sup>

To attempt to reimagine the subject—or the world without the binary of subject/ object is both impossible and utopian—we cannot literally step outside—yet to make an attempt through this sort of theoretical and speculative appropriation may produce a freer play of the political imagination. As Jameson suggests, taking mental liberties with the construction of subject positions and cultural practices may be the first step toward social change.

### Conclusion: context provision as political, public art practice

"Public and Private are Dimensions of the Political"

— Arthur C. Danto, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial"

Benjamin saw that it was not the "attitude" of a work of art to the "relations of production of its time" but its "position" within them that determined its social function. In 1965, Willats was actively framing a new social territory for art to operate in. Willats' works provided a context—the means with which a community could engage in self-critical analysis, exchange views, and produce results. By allowing the "audience" to analyze the "coding structures" of their own world of reference, and organize to change them, Willats fulfilled the goals of Brecht's epic theater described by Benjamin as "...alienating the public, in an enduring manner, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives..." (Benjamin 1978). There is a thread following Brecht's "Alienation... through thinking," to Cage's "silences," and through Agamben's "intellectuality and thought," that ties self-representation to social change. I take hold of this thread. In this passage from "The Author as Producer," also quoted earlier, Benjamin precisely described my artistic vision and my position as a practitioner.

What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—that is, readers or spectator into collaborators... (Benjamin 1978)

I see myself as a context provider, stretching the concept of artistic creation from making content to making context. My goal is to avoid representation—not to speak for others but to provide them with the means to speak for themselves, to speak and be heard. Context provision is about decentering—making multiple spaces—not telling a truth but truths in the plural. It is about facilitating the kind of critical, utopian imaginaries that force us to see the contextual realities of social oppression and othering—the terrible closure of the system in which we are trapped. Context provision is Benjamin's "apparatus."

My focus is on employing information and communication technologies in the service of social justice and social inclusion. My practice involves the development of collaborative tools and community networks. This has taken basically two forms: I have engaged in software design and development projects (building free media and information technology tools for collective self-representation) and initiated project collaborations with nonprofit organizations that address specific groups of participants in their own social contexts.<sup>14</sup>

Both of these approaches require conversation with a community to establish a context-dependent frame, in which the community consciously engages in a sociopolitical dialogue—internally and externally. Within this frame collaborating participants build databases of texts, sounds, and images from their own world of experience and have access to (or the opportunity to build) the tools they need to structure and interpret their own data themselves.

#### For me, context provision is a public art practice

Public art has always presented the problem of a colonizing or objectifying approach shadowed by potential failure (Danto 1998). The ethical strategy of context provision is neither objectifying nor colonizing. This approach to public art avoids representation and appropriation, producing a context in which to imagine something "other"—not organized into a representation that appears to be true for any and all contexts.

What is the possibility of real social transformation linked to art practice? "What can art do?" Can access to information technology and the opportunity for self-representation and subjectification in the digital public domain assist those who have no rights in the physical public domain—literally, in the street? How else?

In the historical narrative of social and political systems, local exchanges proliferate as global states—nothing is inevitable. I believe that substantive social and political change can be enacted through an ethical, context-dependent, public art practice. I believe that social change can occur through collaborations that make possible new practical and political realities for the individuals and communities they engage, both in the digital public domain and the political public domain. How else will marginalized communities have an opportunity to become the agents of their own political enfranchisement? If ethical resistance is, in fact, the resistance of the powerless, then to take hold of the power of representation, of imaginative speculation, may be the only means the powerless have to make a change in their own reality.

What is the position of the context provider in relation to these "relations of production"? I hope to serve as an "operating author," in Benjamin's terms, "not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to intervene actively."<sup>15</sup> How can I avoid that impossible place, the place of the ideological patron that Benjamin decried? I can refuse to stand outside the context I provide. As a context provider, I am more of an immigrant than an ethnographer, crossing over from the objective to the subjective, from the theoretical to the anecdotal, from authority (artist/ethnographer) to unauthorized alien. In these crossings, I am internally displaced and I recognize the refugee that I am—that we all are. This is not an identification in the standard sense; it is a type of disappearance, or death, or loss of self that is necessary to becoming something else.

At first I hesitated about including my own story here. I have been uncomfortable about producing a kind of self-reflexive, anecdotal essay. But my position is not neutral;

in theory or in practice, that would, indeed, be an impossible place. So I have crossed over into the anecdotal, and in practice both my story and theory are also in the frame. Theorizing and storytelling, together, constitute an intervention and a refusal to accept reality as it is right now. Borders are crossed in this intervention—when, through both speaking and hearing, we become and disappear.

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